

# Design as Communication?

## If Design is Communication, the Who is the Sender, Who is the Receiver and What Is the Message?

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### Abstract

Design or, more precisely, the designed artifact has been addressed either as a problematic of down scaled architectural semiotics or as a branch of visual semiotics. However, a genuine tradition of design semiotics does exist. One of its founders was Argentine architectural theorist and historian, Juan Pablo Bonta whose theories have been accessible to an English reading public since the early 1970's. Bonta's approach is explicitly normative. His perspective on the creation and exchange of meaning in and with objects for use is that of the designer. In his writings on the subject he introduced, first, three sign categories of relevance to the description of how meaning is generated: signals, indicators and intended indicators. Later he included a fourth category, the 'pseudo signal'.

Finally he excluded the latter and ended up with the original three. In this paper an attempt will be made to rephrase Bonta's theory of design semiotics. To be more accurate, Bonta's categories will function here as a point of departure for a more unfolded theory of how design may, or may not, function as communication and an alternative resource of meaning construction. In relation to Bonta's ideas, the paper will aim at introducing a schematic model of interaction that focuses on the roles played by different actors in the process of exchange. In addition to Bonta, the paper will present a model of a more complete understanding of 'what' and 'who' is actually letting the different sign functions 'happen'. In order to do so, all four of Bonta's sign categories are kept alive, and a fifth category is introduced; the 'signalled indicator'. The model of creation and exchange of meaning in and with design aims at substituting the traditional communication model, which has had an enormous impact on ideas of meaning in design. However this paper maintains that there is no reason to believe, that design — obviously apart from communication design — actually communicates meaning. It's more complex — and more simple than that.

## 1. THE PROBLEMATIC

In the literature on design, it has been commonplace to suggest that the construction of meaning in, with and in the vicinity of things parallels what happens when verbal signs are processed. It has become part of the folklore of much contemporary design thinking, not only in popular or commercial writings, but also in professional discourses, that things ‘communicate’, ‘talk’, ‘tell stories’ etc. The traditional and simple communication model is still introduced to account for this view:

### SENDER – MESSAGE – RECIPIENT

The reason for this is of course the popularity and effectiveness of the early publications on ‘design semiology’ or the ‘semiotics of objects’ in the 1960’s by Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco. In an often quoted paragraph in his book, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Eco states in order to underline one of the basic hypotheses of his enquiry, «Semiotics studies all cultural processes as *processes of communication*» (Eco: 8). For many years semiology or semiotics of architecture, objects/design, pictures and other visual structures, was synonymous with the stand taken by Barthes and Eco. Thus, design was believed to partake in a standard situation of communication or as a catalyst in a particular kind of meaning formation that eventually was accountable by means of the so-called communication model. Consequently, the role of the designer was to shape and materialise meaning in objects that could function as a message, which the user was supposed to unpack and consume.

Different and more sophisticated or sensitive models with varying terminologies were introduced inspired by, among others, Roman Jakobson\*, Eco\*\*, Eric Buysens, Louis Hjelmslev and Luis Prieto\*\*\*, all of them referring back to Ferdinand de Saussure;

SENDER	MESSAGE	RECIPIENT
ADDRESSER	MESSAGE	ADDRESSEE*
SOURCE	SIGNAL	DESTINATION**
EMITTER	SIGNAL/INDICATOR	INTERPRETER***
PRODUCER		CONSUMER
UTTERER		LISTENER
ENUNCIATOR		PERCEIVER

Actually, Eco also introduced Charles Peirce, especially in relation to his own version of visual semiotics and the discussion of the troublesome category of the ‘icon’. However, the Peirce’ian line of semiotics (and its reception in the context of design theory) will not be discussed explicitly here, since my focus is on Argentine architectural and design theorist, Juan Pablo Bonta, and his semiotic elaborations of and within the framework of the tradition of Saussurian sign theory. And yet, on another occasion, I would certainly be inclined to argue that Bonta’s position is open to an investment of Peirce’s ideas, first of all due to Peirce’s insistence on the materiality of the sign manifestation, the ‘representamen’, as a precondition of the occurrence of the ‘semiosis’.

Even if alternative modellings of the communication model were proposed, a number of precarious questions remained unresolved. For who is actually the sender, who is the recipient, and what sort of message is in fact conveyed in and by things? There are quite a number of candidate agencies to be put into the ‘slots’ of the basic model, as shown in this overview,

		????
		AUDIENCE
		PATRON
		DESIGN HISTORIAN
		CLIENT
		DESIGN CRITIC
		(GIFT) DONEE
		SHOPPER
		BUYER
		CONSUMER
		OPERATOR
		USER
		=
SENDER	MESSAGE	RECIPIENT
=	= APPEARANCE	
DESIGNER	PERFORMANCE	
RETAILER	FUNCTION: PRACTICAL	
SELLER	FUNCTION: AESTHETIC	
SHOPKEEPER	FUNCTION: SYMBOLIC	
GIFT BUYER	UTILITY	
(GIFT) DONOR	USABILITY	
PRODUCER	USAGE	
IMPORTER	?????	
INVESTOR		
WHOLESALE		
ADVERTISING AGENCY		
WINDOW DRESSER		
FASHION REPORTER		
????		

At the very least, this schematic reveals the problematic case of a simple and unrestrained adaptation of any communication model — an adaptation to what happens when things (objects of design) function as mediators (or objectifications) in various sorts of social exchange and interaction between humans and between human beings and things. Even if some writers confess they are merely talking in metaphors as they speak of the relationship between, say, designer and consumer as a dialogue, the whole idea of design as communication is as problematic as it is persisting. Now, it should be emphasised that much design *is*, as a matter of fact, com-

munication; signboards, signposts, posters, poster ads, web design etc. — in short, communication design in general — is concerned with efficient broadcast of information, instructions, warnings and persuasive statements about the availability of goods and services. Nevertheless, most design is *not* communication. If someone tells me that he has heard a chair talk to him or that he frequently receives messages from his right shoe, my best advice would be to look up a psychologist or to contact the local branch of Anonymous Alcoholics.

## 2. JUAN BONTA'S CONTRIBUTION

In order to overcome both the communication line of design thinking and to be able to elucidate more accurately how designers should properly reflect their professional task, Juan Bonta has contributed to what in my view is one of the most productive alternative approaches to design semiotics. But also, it should be underlined that Bonta's ideas are explicitly normative. One might say, that what he presented in his three publications is, in the first place, a 'designer's semiotics' and, in the end, a 'designer's theory' of the meanings of things. My aim is to substitute the designer bias for a cultural analytical approach and, at the same time, keep the semiotic framework.

Bonta's three most important contributions are as follows:

- An article based on a conference paper read in Spain in 1972. It was first published in the 6<sup>th</sup> volume of the journal *Versus* in 1973. Later it was re-issued as «Notes for a Theory of Meaning in Design» in Broadbent, Bunt and Jencks' collection of essays and articles, *Signs, Symbols, and Architecture* (Bonta 1980). In this article Bonta introduces a differentiation of sign modalities, distinguishing between 'indicators', 'signals' and 'intentional/intended indicators' (the nomenclatura will be defined below). The article is without references and quotations; Bonta only states that alternatives to the interpretations of Saussure, which Barthes and Eco were promoting, do exist, and he mentions Belgian linguist Eric Buysens and Argentine semiotician Luis Prieto, the latter, we are allowed to conclude, due to his elaboration of the index category. Prieto argued for a doubling of the Saussurian *signe* by the *indice*, which he modelled after the well-known sign architecture (e.g. Prieto: 125f.):

signifiant		indiquant
signe : -----	: signification	indice: -----: indication
signifié		indiqué

This is Bonta's point of departure, and he adds to Prieto's ideas a discussion of the indicative function of objects for use. In addition to his recasting of Prieto's model of communicative and indicative signs and their interrelationship, Bonta develops a theory of different contexts in order to make transparent what minimal features a 'purist' a set of chess pieces must exhibit, insofar no references to its conventional iconography (horses, towers, small bricks for pawns etc.) allowed. He also reveals his difficulties in encouraging his design students to infer creatively alternatives to traditional designs of chess pieces.

• The previous year, Bonta published his book, *Architecture and its interpretation*, with a subtitle: «A study of expressive systems in architecture» (Bonta 1979). Of interest in this context is the fact that he introduced a fourth sign, ‘pseudo-signal’, in order to be able to address what he, within his systematic and logical framework, found to be the four possible semantic modalities in architecture. The book was about modern and modernist architecture and their related discourses, that is, design in another object scale than the one referred to in the article. However, he presented a rather informative schematic rendering of the four varieties of the semiotic mechanisms that govern meaning production in (and with) objects — in this specific case, buildings:

	Interpreter assumes Intentionality (Communication)	Interpreter does not assume intentionality (Indication)
There is an intentional emitter	SIGNAL	INTENTIONAL INDEX
There is no intentional emitter	PSEUDO-SIGNAL	INDEX

• A very brief summary of the two publications mentioned above appeared in 1993 in an article called «Expression and interpretation in architecture» (Bonta 1993). Now he seems to have dismissed the ‘pseudo-signal’. In a schematic rendering, very much similar to the one just shown above, the space that was previously occupied by this particular sign modality has blackened. Still his project is to consider architectural design as a means of expressions of meanings or, as he says, a ‘state of consciousness’, and, at the same time, to insist on interpretation as a precondition without which no meaning will generate at all. The principal point in this short summary essay is the emphasis Bonta gives to the fact that only in very few cases indeed, the interpreter’s inference of meaning will be a duplicate of the designer’s ‘state of consciousness’. To Bonta this underlines the relevance of questioning the idea of design as communication since the design process is no equivalent to ‘speech’ which is both conditioned and restricted by ‘language’, that is, the language system which in Saussure is labelled *la langue* in contradistinction to *le parole*. Both in his first article and the present one, Bonta stresses the, in semantic terms, ‘unstable’ or polyvalent nature of the object-sign. More precisely, he demonstrates that what in one situation functions as an index may in turn become an intentional index and, finally, become accepted and conventionalised as a symbol (or, in Bonta’s terminology, a signal), only in order to achieve the status of just another index, and the whole process of re-semantisation may start over again.

In the line of Bonta’s thinking, and partly in accordance with his terminology, a modification of the ‘communication model’ to which the process of indication is added, may look like this;

(EMITTER) PRODUCER		USER
	OBJECT	
SENDER	SIGNAL	RECIPIENT
DESIGNER		INTERPRETER (OPERATOR)

In an attempt to follow and follow up his ideas and suggestions and, it should be stressed, in order to broaden his approach to include a cultural-analytical perspective on meaning transactions with things, I have integrated Bonta's sign typology and his account of which meaning components are *in actu* in each modality into a more comprehensive model. The black characters refer to Bonta's terms, while the blue ones are my supplements:

	SIGN	MEANING COMPONENT	SIGN AGENT	ANALYTICAL FOCUS
I	INDICATOR	INDICATIVE	INTERPRETER	FEATURES QUALITIES
II	SIGNAL	COMMUNICATIVE	SENDER/ RECIPIENT	RELATION OF FEATURES & VALUES
III	INTENDED INDICATOR	EXPRESSIVE	«SENDER»/ INTERPRETER	IDENTIFICATION
IV	PSEUDO- SIGNAL	IMPRESSIVE	PRODUCER/ «RECIPIENT»	IDENTIFICATION
V	SIGNALLED INDICATOR	RHETORICAL	«SENDER»/ «RECIPIENT»	SUBCULTURAL INTERCHANGE

As the figure indicates, in addition to sign modality and meaning component, I want to establish what type of agency makes semiosis happen, so to speak; that is, who is (or are) the privileged agent(s) in the different situations? (fourth row in the figure), what is the agent's focus, and what are the kinds of meaning occurring in each instance? (last row to the right in the figure). In what follows, I want to focus on agencies, and not roles, subjects or incarnations. What matters here are positions and types of exchange between positions.

Bonta's definitions of the two basic signs — indicators, which equal Peirce's index and signals corresponding to symbols or conventional signs — are concise and formal. The icon is of no relevance to Bonta. He wants to put forward the idea that the intervention of design (and designers) affects the materialisation and making clear and palpable some idea. Hence Bonta's main interest is how ideas are expressed, in other words, the character of the enunciation (forgive my ill-timed metaphor). He is not interested in qualities or material features *per se* (that is icons or the iconic aspect of the sign) but in the connection of qualities with ideas and intentions. This view is a consequence of the designers' perspective, since successful design is contributed when the visions of the designer *are made* explicit and intelligible qua objective features alone. The user, of course, is interested in qualities — symbolic, practical, operative etc. — or, to put it more simply, the user wants to be able to identify the specific usefulness of a given utensil. Therefore, Bonta's focus is on artifactual qualities in their *de facto* relation to something else (its causes, its effects). In Bonta, emphasis is given to the fact that artifactual qualities, e.g. the qualities of design, are caused by someone (and something), they are produced as well as they are interpreted by someone else, identifying with one or another of the three agencies: interpreter, recipient and «recipient».

Bonta's definition of the indicator is:

An indicator is a directly perceivable fact, by means of which it is possible to learn something about indirectly perceivable facts. [...] Though the former I can learn something about the latter, consequently they are indicators (1980:276).

The indicative relationship is thus characterized as a triadic one (form/meaning/interpreter) (277).

Concerning the signal, Bonta says,

Signals are a special class of indicators that fulfil two additional conditions (*ibid.*).

Signals are produced intentionally, and they are deliberately used with the purpose of conveying something to an interpreter, and the interpreter must acknowledge the act of the emitter as being intentional, since, in this case, the interpreter is a recipient of a conventional sign, a signal. The necessary equipment on the part of the interpreter to act properly as a recipient is knowledge of the specific (linguistic or quasi-linguistic) codes that govern the processing of the signal system in question. If these codes are not accessible, the interpreter is confronted with an indicator. Bonta explains,

Signals have form, meaning and interpreter, like indicators; and in addition they have an emitter. The interpreter of a signal can also be called *receiver* (*ibid.*).

Bonta now adds a third sign: 'the intentional indicator'. He says,

There is an entity which is neither pure indicator nor signal, though it is rooted in both. *The intentional indicator* [...] An intentional indicator is an indicator which fulfils the first of the conditions of the definition of a signal, but not the second [...] it is an indicator deliberately used — or produced — by someone to generate an act of communication, but which must not be recognised as such [...] on the part of the interpreter [...] the user or producer of intentional indicators cannot be properly called *emitter*, since we are not really dealing with communication: it will be better to call him the *producer* (*ibid.*).

Finally, Bonta says the following about the 'pseudo signal',

Indicators also exist that fulfil the second stipulation of the definition of the signal, but not the first one. In other words, there are indicators which are believed by the interpreter to have been deliberately produced by an emitter to communicate, but which are in fact not. I propose calling them *pseudo-signals* (Bonta 1979: 27).

Bonta does not suggest what kind of meaning component is active in this case, but since the interpreter acts guided by a wrong perception of the situation, as a recipient (or as Bonta terms it a *receiver*), the interpreter reacts inadequately upon an *impression* of something and



nothing more. The interpreter will not succeed in getting the meaning, since there is actually no code to operate.

The last sign modality, then, is my proposal. 'The signalled indicator' fulfil both conditions of the signal, but the semiosis in question is based on a double coded message rooted in a sophisticated use of un-coded indicators, and therefore it seems right to label the meaning component 'rhetorical', since the signalled indicator does not produce new meanings but cover up already existing meaning in material disguise. The condition of success for the 'pseudo-signal' is that both parts act as communicators, that is, as emitter and receiver. In fact, however, they are not emitters and receivers although they are processing a coded meaning. The codes are not 'cultural'; they are sub-cultural. The agents become 'emitters' by adopting the position of a producer, and they become 'receivers' by adopting the position of the interpreter. In other words, they are not genuine emitters and receivers, therefore the quotation marks. They interact by means of an exchange of identity marks. If coded into an identity mark, anything may be utilised to facilitate the sub-cultural process of interchange.

### **3. SWEATER SEMIOTICS**

A brief illustration of the workings of the 'system' might be constructed as follows:

#### **1. Index/indicator**

If a sweater is lying on a chair in, say a classroom at a university campus, one would have no difficulties in inferring that a person has left it there. Or, more simply, that somebody has been in the classroom. The interpreter is allowed to draw this elementary conclusion, since the sweater's presence is a result of a person having been in the classroom. The interpreter may easily establish that particular indexical meaning of the sweater. But the interpreter may pursue more sophisticated inquiries: the actual sweater and its scents and size may be interpreted as signs of the user's sex and size; the knit pattern, the colours and the design may be taken for indicators of the user's age, adherence to a specific segment of consumers, social background etc. The sort and quality of the knit yarn reveal to the expert the natural or chemical provenance of the material, and to the average observer, it is possible to infer whether the sweater was made by hand or machine. Finally, the interpreter is permitted to conclude that the presence of the sweater indicates a lowering of temperature.

#### **2. Signal**

If, in a community consisting of at least two subjects, a brown sweater is established as a sign of, say 'chilly summer evening' or 'let's go fishing in the morning' or whatever, we are confronted with a signal, that is, a conventional sign. Whenever a member of the community that maintains this code, and who has unrestricted access to the lexicon of the signals, finds a brown sweater, he or she is expected to act as the recipient of the lexicalised meaning, 'chilly summer evening' etc. The sender of the sweater signal intended to transfer exactly this meaning to particular community members or to the general audience. Of course, the meaning of processing the sweater signal does not prevent any recipient from acting as an interpreter and



from studying the physical sweater in order to establish one or several of its multiple indicators, but this is not necessary in order to identify the signal function. Only if there is any doubt as regards the exact colour tone of the fabric, and, in the end, if there are difficulties in identifying its status of signal, it is of relevance to examine the matter more closely. However, in the standard situation it is only required that the brownness of the sweater is evident.

### **3. Intentional index**

If one wants to let people in one's vicinity believe that one's social position is higher or more important (or the opposite) than it actually is, the most relevant strategy is to use 'intentional indexes'. The first step is to select a suitable fabric and pattern relevant marks and with at least a few conspicuous features (design, logo, trademark) indicating the exclusiveness and 'position' (Bourdieu) of the sweater within the field of the sweater culture of today. The next step is to pour the adequate kind of perfume over it, or to add other visual or olfactory 'marks', with the purpose of infusing a social value in accordance with values normally associated with 'marks' in question. The next step is to leave it casually in some place in order to let other people examine the sweater and allow them to conclude something concerning the social status of the wearer and owner. On his or her side, the owner hopes that people will not see through the trick, that is, unmask the 'emitter' as the producer of the index and, in their capacity of interpreters, infer that he or she only acts like an emitter and is not what that type of sweater usually indicates. Of course, the 'successful' intentional index requires (seen from the point of view of the producer/'emitter') that the trick is not revealed. The interpreter is supposed by the producer/'emitter' to identify his or her position, not as that of the recipient, but as a genuine interpreter, who evaluates the information taken from the perceivable qualities of the sweater on the background of average habits of garment in a given community. In other words, what is required on the part of the receiver is to act 'naturally' and make use of the cultural competence in recalling the storage of ordinary experiences as regards habits, customs, traditions, routines etc. This is exactly what the actions of the producer of 'intentional indexes' are targeted at. Accordingly, this is the whole idea of design that Bonta encourages, that is, to let the user act naturally due to the intervention of the designer whose objective is to shape things in such ways that the performativity of the objects and their usage is both sensible and stands to reason.

### **4. Pseudo-signal**

If a member of the signal community introduced above is confronted with a brownish sweater, he or she may adopt one of two positions, that of the interpreter and that of the recipient/receiver. In the first position, the sweater will be of possible interest as an index in all the senses given above. However, since a brown sweater is a conventional sign signalling; 'chilly summer evening', the position of the recipient is most likely to be taken, and what the recipient is inclined to receive is the message; 'chilly summer evening'. However, (1) the sweater used to be white or light greyish, but it has recently been in the washing machine together with new velvet jeans still saturated with dark brown colour substances. Or (2), someone wears it or has put it somewhere without any intention of entering an exchange of information about, for instance, weather conditions. Forgetfulness, stress, slovenliness or some other reason may account for the

user of the brown sweater having, without intention, acted as an emitter — because someone reacts as if a signal is received, and not because of the sweater user's absent-minded action. Therefore, the recipient is not a 'genuine' one but an interpreter, who has adopted the wrong position, hence the quotation marks.

### 5. Signalled index/indicator

If a sub-community within the community of signal users to whom a brown sweater means 'chilly summer evening' agrees to adding a discrete label to the inner and lower front side of the sweater in order to use it as a sign of adherence to this particular sub-community, we are confronted with the problematic of the signalled index. The members of this sub-community make use of an index, the meaning of which is both kept as a secret among the members and obscured as a consequence of its place. In this case, the visible parts of the sweater may still function as a signal with a conventional meaning attached to it, and/or it may be used as protection in cold weather. Textile experts may still grumble about which colour substance has been used in the production. The sweater may be interpreted as a conventional sign by semioticians studying signal systems, and historians, whose speciality is in fact the interpretation of indexes, may study the physical qualities of it as a source of information concerning the developmental stage of textile technology or the supply of specific types of fabric etc. However, all this is immaterial to the status of the brown sweater with the secret mark, the sole meaning of which is to function as a token of admission for the members of the sub-community. This meaning is not communal or cultural, nor is it natural, i.e. a simple index. The meaning of the intentional index is sub-cultural, the restricted function of which is to signal «membership» in a closed interchange between fellows.

In concluding this attempt to widen the scope of Bonta's design semiotics, it should be underlined that the above distinctions are schematic and that a great number of overlaps of categories and sign functions are to be envisaged when the operations of the model are applied to empirical cases. A fictional narrative of sweater semiotics is one thing; another is the theoretical elaboration and methodological sophistication of design semiotics. Irrespective of the particular theoretical approach, the objectives of design semiotics are to establish how, and under which circumstances, cultural meanings materialise and become mediators of processes of interchange among people, including, how people construct meanings in their encounter with artifacts and natural objects in the standard situations of ordinary life. More specifically, design semiotics studies the role of form(ing) in the social process of 'objectification' (to borrow a term from Daniel Miller's groundbreaking study of material culture in the era of mass consumption, cf. Miller: 1-82), that is, in short, the shape of things as physical mediators of various types of social relationships. In this context, Bonta's approach seems promising due to its focus on physical features and objective qualities of things. As an alternative to most meta-physical speculations about the possible communicative functions of design objects, Bonta's concern is with sofas to place one's body in, teacups to be lifted by the hand, signboards to be seen in a glimpse etc. In short, his approach allows the student of design to insist on the sensorial factuality of things that are formed in order to perform specific functions in accordance with culturally formed needs and wishes.

The limitations of Bonta's theory of meaning in design are due to his stand within the trade. However, it should be noted, that nothing prevents anybody from attempting to elaborate and extend the scope of his approach in order to reorient the perspective of the design critic and design historian on the meaning of things.

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